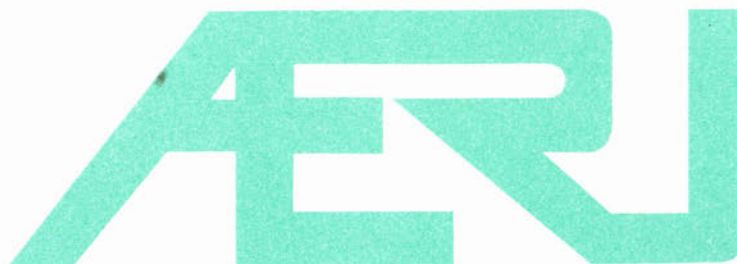


**How to Write a  
Research Proposal**

**Guidelines for  
Lincoln University  
Students Preparing for  
Postgraduate Research**

**AGRIBUSINESS  
& ECONOMICS  
RESEARCH UNIT**



LINCOLN UNIVERSITY, CANTERBURY, NEW ZEALAND

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**John R Fairweather**

**March 1998**

Agribusiness and Economics Research Unit  
PO Box 84  
Lincoln University  
Canterbury  
New Zealand

Ph: (64)(3) 325-2811  
Fax: (64)(3) 325-3847  
Email: [Fairweat@lincoln.ac.nz](mailto:Fairweat@lincoln.ac.nz)

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## **Preface**

This document is aimed at students who are preparing for postgraduate study and who want to do thesis research. The first major step is preparing a research proposal. These guidelines are intended to be helpful to students in all disciplines.

The present document has been developed with input from the following people (in order of their contribution):

Dr Harvey Perkins, Human Sciences

Professor Steve Wratten, Soil, Plant and Ecological Sciences

Dr Bruce Curtis, AERU

Dr David McNeil, Soil, Plant and Ecological Science

Bob Gidlow, Human Sciences

Further suggestions for improvements would be welcomed by the author.

## **Introduction**

Students contemplating research need to prepare a research proposal to communicate their ideas to their supervisors and to help clarify their ideas to themselves. Once this process is completed you can use the proposal to convince other researchers of the merits of your proposed research and to make an application to possible funding agencies. The following guidelines incorporate the essential elements of a proposal, using headings which are generally used and recognised as important in organising research ideas. The main purpose of a proposal is to provide answers to key questions about: the background of the proposed research, the research issue, the literature review, the research objectives, the importance of the research, the design and methods, the timeline and the budget. In the following guide each section of a research proposal is listed along with some brief comments of explanation or guidance.

Note that the process of developing research ideas and conducting research is not always linear or logical, although the final research proposal is linear and logical. You may need to write and revise your proposal many times, using feedback from others, in order to make it clearly and easily understood.

Note also that your proposed research may need to obtain ethical approval, and this process may influence the design of the research. At this stage, the present document focuses on the first plan of the research.

Students who are writing research proposals should be familiar with the appropriate post-graduate rules, and they should work in collaboration with their supervisors.

## **Title Page**

Give a title to the proposed research and state your name, the date, your division or group and contact details: address, telephone number (including extension number if any), fax number, and e-mail address. Good titles refer to the overall aim of the research, that is, why you are doing it and not to the specific aspects of what you will do. The former can be more interesting than the latter.

## **Introduction or Overview or Abstract or Summary**

Briefly give an account of the whole document in one to two paragraphs so that the nature and scope of the proposed research is clear. Write this after you have written all the other parts.

## **Background**

State the obvious about the situation you are proposing to study so the reader knows where you are coming from. Give a very general account of information which logically precedes the more detailed and focused aspects of the proposed research.

## **Research Issues or Research Questions**

State exactly what it is that needs research. This may be a practical problem that needs attention, a gap in empirical research, a theoretical issue that needs resolving or an issue relating to the methods of research. More than one of these gaps may be addressed in a research proposal. Typically they are expressed as questions that your proposed research will address.

## **Literature Review**

One way of answering research questions is by reviewing the literature and learning from what others have found.

Your literature review will reflect the type of logic you will use in the conduct of your research. Broadly speaking, research can use induction (inference of a general law or conclusion from particular instances) or deduction (inference of a particular instance from a general law or conclusion). Inductive methods are grounded in experience and for some advocates there is no requirement for a detailed and comprehensive literature review at the beginning of the research. Some literature will be needed as an indication of the direction of the proposed research, and this will form part of the larger review which will occur throughout all parts of the thesis. Deductive methods put less emphasis on starting with observation, so there is a requirement for a detailed and comprehensive literature review at the beginning of the research.

A literature review tells us what is already known about the topic, identifies important research issues and works towards a conclusion that forms the platform for your research. Take note that a literature review is not a collection of references and descriptions of research but a carefully reasoned development of some key ideas. Good research will be based on a critical appraisal of the literature, that is, one that does not take each item at face value. You need to look for strengths or weaknesses in theories and methods used. (To see good examples of critical evaluation of social science literature, see the journal called *Contemporary Sociology*; and for the natural sciences see *New Scientist*). Generally, there are two broad approaches to reviewing literature: you can ‘run with it’ and take existing ideas and apply them to novel situations, or you can ‘run against it’ and try to show what is wrong with prevailing ideas. By identifying problems and issues first, then designing research that addresses these, you will be in a good position to contribute some useful knowledge to your discipline and to the work of other researchers. This is an important criterion used in judging the merit of research.

## **The Research Objective(s)**

Research has a number of aims or goals which operate at different levels. Your research will have an overall aim that is general and to which your research results will make a contribution. For example, it may be to improve housing provision to the elderly, to improve wheat yields, or to improve theory on agrarian development in capitalist societies. Your proposal will also have to identify the main aim or goal of your research. For example: to identify the housing needs of the elderly in Christchurch, to determine the consequences of organic fertiliser use on wheat growth, or to describe the changes in family farm development in New Zealand under deregulation. Finally, your proposal will have specific, quantifiable research objectives that you plan to achieve, and which you can demonstrate to have been accomplished.

In the case of qualitative research you may have specific research questions rather than specific objectives. In this case the specific objective will be to develop answers to the questions that you want to address in your research.

Research objectives are very important. Together they combine to achieve the overall goal of your research. In the discussion chapter of your thesis, you will discuss your results in terms of the objectives.

## Importance of Research

Before giving details of how you propose to do the research, give an account of why it is important to do the research by accomplishing the objectives and/or answering the research questions. You may want to refer to research **outputs** (thesis, report or published article or book) and research **outcomes** (tangible changes or benefits that result from your research). Take note of the people who have an interest in your research. If there is a funding agency involved, will you provide some benefit to them? Generally who will benefit from the results? Are there any ethical implications that you need to consider?

## Design and Methods (*not* Methodology)

Now focus on the proposed research itself and state what you plan to do. In social science research there are three broad approaches at this point: qualitative research, comparative research and quantitative research. Qualitative research uses research questions that guide research. They provide a starting point from which the research proceeds in an emergent fashion, that is, it may change considerably in response to early findings. Qualitative research generally uses some form of induction. Comparative research (Ragin, 1994) is neither as fluid as qualitative research nor as fixed as quantitative research. It starts with some particular topic, develops concepts and then revises them in the light of experience. Quantitative research typically uses hypotheses to be tested, that is, some form of deduction. They are the foundation on which the research is based. Develop an argument for your choice of qualitative, comparative or quantitative methods. A useful book on these research issues is Blaikie (1993).

Having established the overall design, go on to describe the methods you think most effectively address the research objectives. Be aware that methods are just part of the overall design you are using. Note that most students are dealing here with methods, not methodology (the study of methods). State how the data will be analysed. Involve appropriate experts (e.g. an experienced qualitative researcher or a statistician). Try to think through to where you will be when the empirical research is completed and data are available, then analysed. Will it address the objectives? If it will not then either the objectives or the methods will have to be revised. Discuss the limitations of the proposed research.



## **Timing and Budget**

Having designed your research, it is important to consider how long it will take and what financial costs may be involved. Estimate the amount of time required for each main part of your research and prepare a calendar to show when you expect to complete each part. Researchers often find that it takes twice as long as they originally estimated to do research. Budget items usually need to be given in detail, according to the following categories: travel, computing, data entry or transcribing, equipment, printing costs, general administration, sundry and contingency (the latter is usually estimated at about 15%). Budgeting will show you that your research plans may be very costly and that you may have to modify them accordingly. Bear in mind that research is seldom funded as fully as one would like.

Take note that your proposal is an indication of what you would like to happen, but the plan will change as time goes by. Therefore you need to be aware that some key strategic decisions will need to be made if, for example, something has not been achieved on time or it cannot be achieved because of some unanticipated event(s).

## **References**

Include a list of all references you have cited.

## **Tips On Proceeding to Develop a Research Proposal**

Write down your ideas as they develop and revise them to make them more logical and easy to follow.

Talk to people about your research and learn from their experiences and from the literature they might suggest.

Do not plunge ahead and start your research without thinking through as far as possible the research that you plan to do. However, do not procrastinate nor wait until your proposal is perfect, because in doing these things, you may never start to do the research!

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